

# How Does Work Overload Affect Unethical Behaviors? The Mediating Role of Pay Dissatisfaction

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## Introduction

Unethical behavior has become one of the most important problems in today's business world due to corporate scandals (Chen McCain, Tsai, & Bellino, 2010). The increased concern about ethical issues in society has encouraged organizations to spread ethical rules and values internally (Jung, Namkung & Yoon, 2010). Despite these efforts, unethical behaviors in the service industry have continued to increase (Yeşiltaş & Tuna, 2018), particularly being more frequently observed in the hotel industry compared to other service industries (Dimitriou & Ducette, 2018). Tourist venues, hotels, and resorts are among the organizations with common unethical behaviors (Lugosi, 2019). Thus, examining the determinants of unethical behavior in the hotel industry where unethical behaviors are so high can create value for practitioners.

Researchers have suggested work overload to be able to drive unethical behavior (Poulston, 2009; Belhassen, 2012; Yeşiltaş & Gürlek, 2019). However, no empirical evidence is found to support this argument. Based on this gap in the research, the current study aims to reveal how work overload increases unethical behavior. For this purpose, a research model has been developed that suggests work overload to increase unethical behaviors by way of pay dissatisfaction.

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DOI: 10.12711/tjbe.2020.13.1.0141  
Turkish Journal of Business Ethics, 2020  
isahlakidergisi.com

## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Work overload refers to the employee perception that the amount of given work exceeds one's ability to complete (Kanbur, 2018). Individuals' excessive workloads can lead to pay dissatisfaction (Mulki, Lassk, & Jaramillo, 2008). According to the discrepancy model, pay dissatisfaction results from the high difference between the expected and actual pay (Lawler, 1971). Pay dissatisfaction occurs when individuals get insufficient wages for their labor (Wu & Wang, 2008). According to equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965), individuals compare the benefits they obtain in return for their labor with the benefits other individuals obtain. Individuals whose workload exceeds their ability may feel deprived of pay for their work, which can lead to pay dissatisfaction. Some studies in the literature have found work overload to increase pay dissatisfaction (Mulki, Lassk, & Jaramillo, 2008; Altaf & Awan, 2011). The following hypothesis has been developed on this theoretical basis.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Work overload positively and significantly affects pay dissatisfaction.

Unethical behavior is defined as the type that contradicts the policies, values, and norms that an organization sets (Baker, Hunt, & Andrews, 2006). Unethical behaviors commonly observed in the hotel industry such as theft, resource abuse (Tresidder & Martin, 2018; Lugosi, 2019), corruption (Krippel, Henderson, Keene, Levi, & Converse, 2008; Stevens, 2001; Gillard, Chen, & Lv, 2018), and deception (Harris, 2012; Akhtar, Ahmad, Siddiqi, & Akhtar, 2019), are discussed within the scope of the current research. Although being widely observed in the hotel industry, few studies are found on the reasons that motivate employees to act unethically (e.g., Zhao et al., 2013; Tian et al., 2014). Further research is recommended on the determinants of unethical behavior in the hotel industry (Dimitriou & Durette 2018). Theoretical studies have predicted pay dissatisfaction to be able to lead to unethical behavior (Jung & Yoon, 2015; Jung & Yoon, 2018; Moon & Hur, 2018) as a response to pay dissatisfaction. Tang and Chiu (2003) found pay dissatisfaction to be an important determinant of unethical behavior. Based on the above theoretical discussion, the following hypotheses have been developed.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Pay dissatisfaction positively and significantly affects employees' propensity to engage in resource abuse.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Pay dissatisfaction positively and significantly affects employees' propensity to engage in theft.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Pay dissatisfaction positively and significantly affects employees' propensity to engage in corruption.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Pay dissatisfaction positively and significantly affects employees' propensity to engage in deception.

Previous studies have suggested a causal priority to exist between work overload and pay dissatisfaction (Seymour & Buscherhof, 1991; Denton, Zeytinoglu, Davies, & Lian 2002; Mulki, Laskk & Jaramillo, 2008). The literature has additionally emphasized perceived pay to possibly be an important link in the relationship between work demands and negative employee behaviors (DeConinck & Stilwell, 2004; Balducci, Schaufeli, & Fraccaroli, 2011; Wang et al., 2010). Work overload, as a demand from work, can drive unethical behavior by increasing pay dissatisfaction among employees. In other words, work overload can increase unethical behavior by means of pay dissatisfaction. Based on the above theoretical discussion, the following hypothesis has been presented.

H6: Pay dissatisfaction fully mediates the effect of work overload on employees' propensity to engage in a) resource abuse, b) theft, c) corruption, and d) deception.

## Method

### Sample

The hotel industry, as a place where unethical behavior is intensely observed (Stevens, 2001; Harris, 2012) and accepted as an important part of the Turkish service industry (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007), forms the context of the research. The data used to test the research hypotheses have been obtained from employees of four- and five-star hotels in İstanbul; 800 questionnaires were delivered to the hotels. In order to ensure confidentiality, questionnaires were delivered to the employees in sealed envelopes. Two weeks later, 361 questionnaires were collected from the hotels. The questionnaires were examined meticulously, and 22 unusable questionnaires were removed from the dataset. As a result, 339 questionnaires were included in the analysis.

### Measuring the Variables

The scales of work overload, pay dissatisfaction, and propensity to engage in unethical behavior were translated into Turkish using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970). Work overload was measured using four items borrowed from Price's (2001) study. Pay dissatisfaction was measured using four items adapted from

Heneman and Schwab's (1985) study. Propensity to engage in unethical behavior was measured using twelve items from the Chen and Tang's (2006) study.

### Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling has been used to test the measurement model and research hypotheses. The research follows the two-stage approach proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) for evaluating the model. The significance of the mediating effect was tested using the bootstrap method (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). The recommendations from James, Mulaik, and Brett (2006) have been adhered to for deciding on mediation type, with full and partial mediation models being compared.

### Findings

According to the findings, work overload has a positive and significant effect on pay dissatisfaction ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $t = 2.313$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Pay dissatisfaction affects resource abuse positively and significantly ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $t = 3.373$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Pay dissatisfaction affects theft positively and significantly ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $t = 2.451$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Pay dissatisfaction affects corruption positively and significantly ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $t = 2.913$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Pay dissatisfaction affects deception positively and significantly ( $\beta = 0.18$ ,  $t = 2.899$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). Accordingly these findings support hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5.

When comparing the full mediation model ( $\chi^2 = 369.722$ ,  $df = 164$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 2.254$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.061$ ,  $CFI = 0.95$ ,  $NFI = 0.91$ ) with the partial mediation model ( $\chi^2 = 385.987$ ,  $df = 169$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 2.257$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.085$ ,  $CFI = 0.89$ ,  $NFI = 0.85$ ), the full mediation model has better fit indices ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 16.265$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In terms of the mediation effect, pay dissatisfaction mediates the effect of work overload on resource abuse (indirect effect = 0.044,  $p < .001$ ). Pay dissatisfaction mediates the effect of work overload on theft (indirect effect = 0.033,  $p < 0.001$ ). Pay dissatisfaction mediates the effect of work overload on corruption (indirect effect = 0.039,  $p < .001$ ). Pay dissatisfaction mediates the effect of workload on deception (indirect effect = 0.039,  $p < .001$ ). According to these findings, hypothesis H6 is supported.

### Conclusion and Discussion

This research aims to reveal how work overload increases unethical behavior. The developed hypotheses have been tested using data from hotel employees using

structural equation modeling. The findings reveal work overload to increase pay dissatisfaction and pay dissatisfaction to increase unethical behavior. Considering that unethical behaviors are widely observed in the hotel industry, this research is expected to contribute to the literature. Though widely observed in the hotel industry, limited evidence is found on the determinants of unethical behavior (e.g., Zhao, Peng, & Sheard, 2013; Tian, Zhang, & Zou, 2014). This study broadens the existing literature, revealing that work overload increases unethical behavior through pay dissatisfaction. From its contribution to the perspective on practice, this research provides practitioners with the following recommendations. Managers should implement practices such as flexible work hours (Fuller & Hirsh, 2019), equal sharing of workload (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009), work-life balance (Fontinha, Easton, & Van Laar, 2019), and fair performance appraisal (Gürlek, 2019). In addition, managers should raise employees' pay levels and establish a fair pay system. In addition, they can perform practices such as reward and promotion based on service performance (Luu, 2019).

This research has several limitations as well as theoretical and practical contributions. First, this is a cross-sectional study. Data for the dependent and independent variables have been collected simultaneously at a specific time and in a specific region. A longitudinal research design is recommended for future studies. Second, this research has been conducted over a limited sample and only in the province of Istanbul. Therefore, the findings obtained may not be generalized to other contexts. Future studies can be conducted in hotels located in other major tourist destinations of Turkey. Third, social desirability is a common problem in ethical research (Randall & Fernandes, 1991). For this reason, future studies can collect data for dependent and independent variables at different time intervals using the time-lag method (Reio, 2010). This study has addressed the direct and indirect determinants of unethical behavior from a limited perspective. Future studies may address variables such as abusive supervision, reward injustice, customers' unethical behaviors toward employees, work alienation, and moral disengagement as determinants of unethical behavior.

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